

This week in history: January 30-February 5

30 January 2017

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25 years ago: Venezuelan constitution suspended following coup attempt

The government of President Carlos Andres Perez announced its suspension of the Venezuelan constitution February 4, 1992, as it continued operations aimed at suppressing an abortive military coup that began the night before.

Officers loyal to the government claimed that military forces backing the coup had surrendered in the capital of Caracas as well as in the cities of Maracay, Maracaibo, and Valencia. It was reported that up to 60 people were killed in the fighting and more than 200 others wounded.

The coup attempt began when paratroopers from Maracay, 60 miles west of the capital, surrounded the presidential palace and presidential offices in Caracas. Maracay was the site of Venezuela's main air base where US military advisers were stationed.

Government spokesmen said that the middle-ranking officers who led the revolt intended to kill Perez and install another regime. Some observers noted that these officers, as well as lower-ranking army personnel, had seen their living standards dramatically decline in previous years, along with those of the vast majority of Venezuelans.

The coup attempt came in the midst of continuing strikes, riots and demonstrations which were sparked by the attempts of the Perez government to meet payments on the country's \$32 billion foreign debt by imposing brutal austerity measures.

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50 years ago: Reuther resigns from AFL-CIO council

On February 3, 1967, labelling the AFL-CIO as "complacent" and a "custodian of the status quo," UAW President Walter Reuther resigned from the executive council and other important posts in the federation. Top UAW officials, including Emil Mazey and Leonard Woodcock, also resigned their positions in the AFL-CIO leadership, effecting a virtual split with the 13.5 million-member labor body.

In a letter sent to 1,500 local unions, the UAW executive board claimed that its disagreements with the AFL-CIO were of a fundamental character, calling for the trade union bureaucracy to act as advocates of "creative social change." Reuther declared the UAW would push for reformist legislation in the areas of civil rights, housing and medical care and for a reduction in military tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In the months leading up to the split, Reuther had publicly criticized AFL-CIO President George Meany's position on Vietnam. While supporting the imperialist war, Reuther opposed the official AFL-CIO position as "intemperate" and "hysterical." In November the UAW president boycotted an executive council meeting in which Meany's resolution on Vietnam passed unanimously.

Reuther's break with Meany was in no way a rejection of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy's ferocious anticommunism and subordination of the interests of the working class to US imperialism. It rather reflected the divisions which were mounting within the US ruling class itself over what policy to pursue in Vietnam, under conditions of deepening economic and social crisis at home.

Reuther was lined up with those sections of the Democratic Party, represented by figures such as William Fulbright, Eugene McCarthy, and later Robert Kennedy, who were opposed to the Johnson administration's handling of the war. Significantly, Reuther maintained his adamant opposition to a political break by the labor movement from the Democratic Party and the formation of a Labor Party

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75 years ago: German Afrika Korps retakes Benghazi

At noon on January 30, 1942, General Erwin Rommel's German Afrika Korps recaptured control of the eastern Libyan coastal city of Benghazi. Only weeks earlier Rommel's forces had been pressed all the way back to El Aghelia at the bottom of the Gulf of Sidra by the British army, with Allied forces taking control of almost all of the eastern Cyrenaica region. Rommel had little choice but to retreat back to the starting position the German Army held the previous May.

Rommel's forced retreat, however, drastically shortened his previously vulnerable supply lines. Consequently in early January the German North African army situated in Tripoli was able to receive a convoy of 55 new tanks, armored cars, and anti-tank guns that had previously been denied to the Mediterranean theater because of the demands placed upon the German war effort by Operation Barbarossa inside the Soviet Union.

By the beginning of 1942 the British Eighth Army was in disarray. The 7th Armoured Division had been replaced by the inexperienced 1st Armoured Division, while other veteran military formations, including an Australian contingent, had been shipped to the Asian theater. The Germans were thoroughly aware of British battle plans due to their ability to intercept reports from the American military attaché in Cairo, Bonner Fellers, whose code was easily broken.

On January 21 Rommel had been able to take the British by surprise by striking back into Cyrenaica. Rommel told neither the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) nor the Italian Comando Supremo of his plans and ignored repeated attempts by the OKW to halt his advances. One German column under Rommel's command advanced up the coastal road towards Benghazi while another two panzer divisions turned inland. In five days of fighting they destroyed almost 250 British armored vehicles. The British 1st Armoured Division was at risk of an encirclement by German forces, but the slower than expected advance of the panzer divisions allowed the Allied forces to escape Cyrenaica into western Egypt.

Hitler was overjoyed at the news of Rommel's successes—in sharp contrast to news emerging from the Eastern Front, where the Red Army had inflicted a series of defeats on the Wehrmacht—and promoted him to General der Panzertruppe.

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100 years ago: Germany declares unrestricted submarine warfare

On January 31, 1917, the German government announced that it was resuming unlimited submarine warfare, using so-called U-boats, and targeting all shipping in the war zone of the eastern Atlantic. The announcement markedly escalated tensions with the United States and provided the American government of Woodrow Wilson with a pretext to directly intervene in the First World War.

The move was a reversal of the policy adopted by Berlin, after the sinking of the passenger ship *Lusitania* in May 1916, which resulted in the death of 128 US citizens. In September 1916, in response to notes from the Wilson administration, the German government had stated, "Liners will not be sunk by our submarines without warning and without safety of the lives of noncombatants, provided the liners do not try to escape or offer resistance."

German strategists viewed submarine warfare as the only means of countering the effective blockade of the ports of the Central Powers, imposed by the British navy. The decision to resume submarine warfare followed the failure of half-hearted attempts by the Wilson administration and the German government of Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg to establish a peace process.

The German declaration was used to escalate longstanding plans of the Wilson administration to dispense with formal US "neutrality" and enter the global conflict. American banking firms had already loaned billions of dollars to the Anglo-French allies, profiting handsomely from the bloodshed in Europe. Thomas W. Lamont, a partner in the House of Morgan, for instance, stated, "Our firm had never for one moment been neutral. We didn't know how."

Massive quantities of copper, cotton and wheat had poured across the Atlantic. US banks registered the greatest growth by any financial institutions to that point in history, with an increase in deposits of over 33 percent in 1916 alone. Germany's submarine warfare threatened this lucrative trade.

The US ambassador to Britain sent a cable back to Washington in early 1917, noting the perilous state of the war-ravaged economies of Britain and France. He commented, "Perhaps our going to war is the only way in which our present prominent trade position can be maintained and a panic averted."

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